

# ALASKA MARINE HIGHWAY

## — 50<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY —

### A World of Motion

My uncle George Wheeler, a timber faller, once asked me, “Why do you go to sea? It all looks the same,” he had concluded. What he did not understand is that there is nothing like sailing along the coast of southern Alaska. We covered a lot of territory and to a ship’s officer, ours is a world of motion watching the constellations come and go, Orion announcing fall and winter, Leo announcing spring and summer, the fixed stars, the wandering planets, the sun and the orbiting moon, all rising, crossing the local meridian, and setting.

Around every corner, along each narrow passageway, or out to the edge of a distant horizon there may be a new scene of visual wonder, perhaps a glimpse of a rare green flash of the setting sun. When crossing the Gulf of Alaska in September with the *Kennicott*, we observe the setting sun on those clear days with a sharp, well-defined horizon. This time of the year, we are heading toward the setting sun nearing the equinox, a time when the sun sets due west. We watch with binoculars as the upper limb of the sun slowly dips below the watery horizon and disappears. At that moment, a rare sight emerges, when for only a few brief seconds, a green flash erupts into view, a color of green of such stunning beauty and purer than any emerald.

Alternatively, perhaps a late summer’s twilight with noctiluscent clouds looking like mother of pearl spread across the evening sky, or winter’s orange alpenglow bathing high, snow-covered mountains at sunrise or sunset, illuminating high-wind snow banners curling off their peaks and ridgelines.

Heavily timbered mountainsides march down to the high-tide line in a moving panorama, and in the winter, snowflakes blast the wheelhouse windows.

Forces of nature act upon a ship above and below the water. There are moving tides, both the vertical rise and fall, and the horizontal flow of ebbing



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and flooding currents, tide lines where opposing currents collide and whirlpools swirl. Weather is constantly on the move producing strong wind and powerful waves upon an undulating sea that never rests. Winter's freezing spray, summer's gray skies and rain, or the sound and whistle of roaring wind through the whip antennas, motion, visible and invisible, is all around. Visible life is in abundance, jumping salmon, breaching whales, foraging bears, and myriads of sea birds flying who knows where.

Brilliant shafts of sunlight move across the water while cascading streams fall from alpine heights directly to the sea. When crossing the Gulf of Alaska, a glorious sight, the glacier-scoured ramparts of Mount Fairweather (15,300 feet) of the Fairweather Range stand boldly on those rare days when the sun shines with blue sky overhead and low, obscuring stratus overcast is nowhere to be found. Here is the greatest sea level to mountain top rise in the world, evidence of another, slower type of motion.



The Kennicott running with the wind, southeast 60 knots, offshore of Cape Fairweather.

impede storms until they stall and weaken, or continue a rapid deepening with increasing wind and sea.

There are Alaskan ports-of-call, large and small, each individual, and each

A great mountain barrier makes its own weather, the Fairweather Range creating spectacular lightening and thunderstorms when moist air is uplifted over the massive ramparts. Scientists think the greatest amount of precipitation in the world may fall here. Falling as snow, this tremendous precipitation remains unmeasured. Barrier effect of high mountains can



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community needing marine transportation in order to connect with the outside world. There are vessels of all types underway, in motion, conducting their business – trollers, seiners, crabbers, pot shrimpers, shrimp draggers, packers, tugboats with their cargo barges, gravel barges, fuel barges, or log rafts and log barges, summer cruise ships, foreign freighters, military vessels, and sister ships of the Alaskan Marine Highway fleet. Captains and mates observe the relative motions of other vessels, and the motion of their ship when approaching a dock or traversing a narrow channel.

Mariners over time see a wealth of natural extravaganzas. On the evening of March 23, 1991 while transiting through Peril Strait, we viewed a stunning display of *Aurora Borealis*, scarlet in color, the surface of the water and the snow-covered mountains reflecting scarlet red, and yet the display of northern lights were transparent to see the stars beyond, especially the Big Dipper and Polaris. Passengers and crew wandered the *Aurora*'s decks for hours to watch the splendor with wonder.

In August 1992 Mount Spurr, a volcano west of Anchorage, Alaska erupted sending volcanic ash thousands of feet into the atmosphere. Drifting eastward, the ash cloud made its presence known in Southeastern Alaska with spectacular sunsets and a gray trail of ash drifting high above southern Southeastern Alaska.

In December of that year, an Arctic high-pressure system moved through the area producing clear skies, and cold, strong northeast winds blowing 35 to 75 knots depending on location. At our dock on Prince of Wales Island at Hollis, the wind blew steadily off the dock 25 to 40 knots, making it difficult to dock the ship. Should the wind set the ship away from dock before tying up, there was a danger of grounding on a nearby reef before one could turn around or back out into the wider reaches of Clark Bay.

Outbound from Stewart/Hyder in the deep fjord of Portland Canal at about



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1800 (6 p.m.) on August 4, 1994, we encountered a passing cold front. Rainfall was torrential with a strong southeast wind and lightening strikes and flashes all around us. Between the wind and the rain beating on the house top and the loud thunderclaps, it was difficult to hear as we piloted our way down Portland Canal. Passing through lower Pearce Canal to the open sea at Dixon Entrance, the weather improved as the cold front advanced further inland.

In January 1995, our week began with some nasty weather that included heavy snow, rain and southeasterly winds up to 35 knots. By Monday, the overcast had cleared away into beautiful clear, blue-sky days and star-lit nights. A bright moon casting its moonlight made for good night vision and traveling in the narrows. Mars shines brightly to the southeast sky in the early evening, while Orion's Belt with bright Sirius below travels across the sky from east to west, setting nearly due west, a point to remember if adrift in a lifeboat. There were no sightings of the northern lights.

Winds were light for the most part with light southeasterly in most areas and northerly wind in Lynn Canal. Upon arrival in Skagway on February 3, 1995, we docked with northerly wind blowing 10 knots with heavy snow falling. We departed an hour and fifteen minutes later on schedule. Backing away from our dock, turning the ship around in the harbor, we set a southerly course down Taiya Inlet bound for Haines. Immediately, we were met with a wall of southeasterly wind blowing 50 knots funneling up Taiya Inlet and warming temperatures. By the time we passed Taiya Point at the mouth of the inlet, the wind was blowing 75 knots. A large surge rocked the ship at the Haines dock and we doubled up the mooring lines. After departing Haines southward to Point Sherman, the wind remained southeast 60 knots. Once past Point Sherman the wind died away for the rest of the voyage to Auke Bay (Juneau). We found the harbor at Hollis frozen over with ice on January 17, 1996. Temperatures north of Petersburg were very cold with northerly winds





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blowing 15 to 20 knots. In upper Lynn Canal, at Skagway, the temperature was -10 degrees F with a north wind of 45 knots and gusts over 50 knots, producing a chill factor of -70 degrees F. We were dressed well in winter gear for the occasion but our ship's boiler lost boiler pressure just trying to keep the interior demands for heat to stay warm. Spectacular displays of northern lights illuminated the cold, moonless nights.

Later that same winter, in February, we noted some great views of the planets Venus and Saturn, the two being close together and nearly aligned, Venus with a computed altitude of  $16^{\circ} - 14.3'$  and an azimuth of  $235.1^{\circ}$ , and Saturn with a computed altitude of  $16^{\circ} - 49.3'$  and an azimuth of  $233.1^{\circ}$ .

In early March 1996, we encountered heavy fog northbound in Wrangell Narrows at the beginning of the week. Our new raster scan Bridge Master II radar performed beautifully and at no time did we lose track of an aid to navigation (buoy or light). Scenery this week was postcard perfect with some memorable early morning moonsets. Regardless of much overcast, we began seeing glimpses of the long-period (every 70,000 years) Comet Hyakutake in the night sky. By April 17, we still enjoyed good views of Hyakutake with binoculars, a precursor to shorter-period Comet Hale-Bopp (every 2,533 years).

In late April 1996, our week onboard began nice enough with showers and periods of sunshine with light wind to no wind. That all changed on Sunday, April 28, as a deep low-pressure system moved into our area bringing with it strong southeast winds and heavy rainfall that persisted until the next day. At Metlakatla, there were waterspouts and williwaws of considerable force dancing across the surface of Port Chester. The windsock on our dock was going around in circles. One blast of wind while we passed in front of town registered 80 knots on our anemometer. By Tuesday, the low had moved inland, and the southeast winds fell flat and the sun came out once



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again.

Nearly a year later, on April 1, 1997, another powerful storm struck with force. While approaching our main berth in Ketchikan from the north during the late evening, we were blasted by a strong williwaw from the southwest. The *Aurora* lurched rapidly toward the dock for a very hard landing. Our bow thruster, engines, and rudders were powerless to overcome it. My approach had to be wider than normal due to some barges moored along the face of the shipyard dock, giving the *Aurora* a longer distance to travel sideways with the wind, and thus increase the sideways set and speed into the dock. As it was, we landed parallel on the closely spaced dock fenders with no apparent damage, other than broken dock-lighting bulbs and some shaken terminal agents who were there to receive our mooring lines and secure them to the dock bollards.

Beginning in March 1997, the nights were especially spectacular with Comet Hale-Bopp showing brightly against a background of the northern lights, meteors, and a gibbous moon. At times, the comet showed so brightly we could see its reflection on the surface of the glassy calm water. By the end of April, spring was in evidence everywhere, from melting snow of the higher elevations to the new crop of green beach grass. We viewed humpback whales in Tenakee Inlet and a large black bear behind Prowley Rocks at the north entrance to Wrangell Narrows. Hale-Bopp was rapidly fading from view and its brightness diminished as it passed into the southern hemisphere. We marveled at our good fortune to see both Hayakutake and Hale-Bopp in our lifetimes.

A touch of fall in the air by September, and during the middle of that month, there was some thunderstorm activity with the night sky interrupted with frequent lightening strikes. On the clear nights, we could see two moons orbiting around the planet Jupiter with binoculars regardless of the bright moonlight.



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September 10, 1998, we nearly hit two humpback whales near the Green Island Lighthouse in Chatham Sound, B.C. on our return from Prince Rupert to Ketchikan. They surfaced directly in front of the *Aurora* and disappeared under the flare of the bow, apparently diving to avoid the ship. Second Mate, Steve Hales, had time enough to take the engines out of gear, stopping the propellers. Fortunately, we did not hit them as they were reported to have resurfaced safely astern of the ship.

More commonly, however, we hit floating logs, especially at night. Each month the higher high tides sweep the shores clean of logs and debris in southern Southeastern Alaska. Tidal currents gather the flotsam and it drifts. Lines of debris and logs across a channel can form where tidal currents collide. As a rule, spruce logs float higher in the water while hemlock logs float lower to the surface, and sometimes if waterlogged enough, a hemlock log will submerge just below the surface, unseen by eyes of a lookout and navigator on the bridge of a passing ship.

On the *Aurora*, there were several similar occasions when we hit logs. We hit a log in Tongass Narrows that went to the propellers, jarring the ship, and knocking paint of the hull. In another instance, the *Aurora* hit a log at night in Peril Strait. It bounced under the hull and jammed inside a propeller shaft strut. An end of the log protruded into the propeller blades, making an awful noise. Rather than go astern in a narrow channel at night with strong currents to dislodge the log, we continued outbound until we reached the open waters of Hoonah Sound where we able to go astern for nearly one half a mile before the log was finally dislodged by sternway and propeller backwash.

In another example, as a second mate I once hit a log with the *Malaspina* on a clear, sunny, calm day in Stikine Strait, just outside of Wrangell. We never saw the log. Once struck, it rolled along the bottom of the ship and wedged



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inside a propeller shaft strut, the portside, stainless steel propeller blades striking the protruding end of the log sending loud noise and vibrations throughout the ship. Bringing the ship to a stop, we went astern for nearly one half mile, gaining speed, before sternway and propeller backwash dislodged the log. Our captain, Captain Maynard Reeser, was on his last voyage before retirement. Amid all the clatter and vibrations, he entered the wheelhouse and asked me in his gruff, though friendly voice, “What are you trying to do, ruin my retirement party?”

Thursday, September 24, 1998, we viewed, while crossing Kasaan Bay, a most brilliant display of northern lights, unusual for southern Southeast Alaska. Aurora borealis was radiating from a central point overhead with bright streams of colored light made of reds, blues, greens and yellows. Meanwhile to our north, waving curtains of light moved rapidly across the horizon and struck the sky with sudden bursts of bright color so intense it reflected on the surface of the sea. The night was clear and we observed Jupiter again with binoculars easily picking out three of her orbiting moons. Motion is everywhere.

Written and Photograph Provided by Captain Bill Hopkins, AMHS Retired

